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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 002523

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDED NOFORN CAPTION)

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SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/23/2018  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)  
SUBJECT: TFGG01: FURTHER DETAILS ON RUSSIAN "WITHDRAWAL"

REF: MOSCOW 2522

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Eric Rubin: Reasons 1.4 (b, d).

11. (C) Summary: In private comments by MFA officials and the public statements of Deputy Chief of General Staff Nogovitsyn, the limits to the Russian withdrawal, as DFM Ryabkov explained to the Ambassador on August 22, are being spelled out: the peacekeeping presence will expand significantly within the South Ossetian zone of conflict; a "buffer zone" at odds with the Six-Point Plan is defended on military grounds; and the lack of an "international mechanism" is provided as a hook for its continuation. Russian ire over Saakashvili, his decision to launch an assault, and his ability to jeopardize Russia's relations with the U.S. have not abated. While rumors continue to circulate over U.S. encouragement of Saakashvili's attack, MFA denied reports of a military base in South Ossetia or the creation of a no-fly zone, and claimed ignorance on SS-21s being positioned in the zone of conflict. There remains a fundamental disconnect over the Six-Point Plan. End Summary

Withdrawal on Russian Terms  
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12. (C) In an August 22 meeting, MFA Acting 4th CIS Director Dmitriy Tarabrin and South Ossetia Special Envoy Yuriy Popov provided some additional details and commentary on Russia's interpretation of its withdrawal obligations under the Medvedev-Sarkozy agreement. While elaborating on DFM Ryabkov's description to the Ambassador (reftel) of Russia's expanded "peacekeeping" role, they did not explicitly repudiate -- as Ryabkov did -- Russian acceptance of the French sideletter of assurances. Throughout the conversation we pushed back vigorously on Russia's conception of a "buffer zone" and its ability under bilateral or multilateral agreements to retain a long-term presence in Georgia proper, underscoring its obligation to return its forces to an August 7 posture. The highlights of their often heated comments, combined with elements of Deputy Chief of Staff General Nogovitsyn's August 22 press conference, include:

-- More Peacekeepers: Confirming MinDef Serdyukov's statement that the troop withdrawal would be completed by the end of August 22, they laid down caveats on its terms. While Russian military forces would leave Georgia proper and move to South Ossetian territory, one battalion would remain inside a "buffer zone" on Georgian territory. Nogovitsyn fine-tuned the numbers, stating that 272 peacekeepers would be posted at 8 checkpoints comprising one line of defense, with another 180 forces at 10 checkpoints forming a second line along the edge of the enclaves. With respect to the total number of peacekeepers within the South Ossetian zone

of conflict, Popov told us that "obviously" the situation had changed, and that those peacekeeping forces likely would be expanded up to brigade-strength, with Nogovitsyn estimating 2100 would remain. Russian peacekeeper levels would remain the same in Abkhazia, with Nogovitsyn telling the press that they totaled 2142 (slightly less than the 2500 level reached in May 2008). Other MinDef sources speculated that it would take 10 days for those Russian military forces not staying behind in a "peacekeeper" capacity to depart South Ossetia.

-- "Buffer Zone:" Popov did not attempt to couch Russia's creation of a "buffer zone" in legal terms; instead, he framed it in General Staff requirements to ensure that Georgian rockets or artillery could not reach South Ossetia. Explaining that the maximum range of such weaponry was 40-50 km, Popov said the military had been bargained down to a width of 15-20 km, with Nogovitsyn telling the press that the span would range from 6-18 km. Popov described the creation of the buffer zone as an "immediate action" taken while awaiting an "international mechanism" to be agreed upon. When pressed on the occupation of Georgian territory, Tarabrin replied that Russian actions were "imposed by the situation."

Nogovitsyn asserted the legitimacy of Russian actions under bilateral and multilateral agreements, while reiterating that Georgia had "no moral or legal right to set terms" for the Russian presence in the region.

-- International Mechanism: Popov told us that the OSCE forces were observers, not peacekeepers, and did not constitute an international mechanism. The MFA expected that Russian peacekeepers and OSCE monitors would "simultaneously" patrol the buffer zone. Questioned about Russian OSCE PermRep Voronkov's August 20 statement that EU forces would not be accepted by South Ossetia, Popov agreed this did not correspond to the Sarkozy sideletter, which left open the possibility of EU, UN or an OSCE-framed mechanism, but reflected South Ossetian hostility and suspicion of Western motives and involvement in the August 7-8 hostilities. Popov

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argued "first things first," stating it was necessary to ensure security and stability, before moving to the next stage. (Note: In a separate August 21 meeting, MFA OSCE Second Secretary Konstantin Serebnyak reiterated the Russian view that OSCE monitors should primarily monitor how the Georgians observe the 6-Point Plan, because "Georgia started the aggression against South Ossetia." He also mentioned that Russia plans to suggest its own candidates for the next set of MMOs.) Popov cautioned that Russia could not force arrangements on the South Ossetian leadership, and did not want to provoke "impulsive moves" by that leadership.

-- Original Sin: Popov said he took the failure of the U.S. to criticize Saakashvili's actions personally. "Misha is your s.o.b., but you behave as if you are unaware he perpetrated first." Popov implored the U.S. to "name things as they are." He claimed Saakashvili was the first to transgress a red line, and asserted that Russia's actions, whether disproportionate or not, were a reaction. Popov insisted that the U.S. knew Georgia started the conflict, and warned that covering this up "put a question mark" on future U.S.-Russian cooperation. He said Russia was trying to convey this message to Washington, but the message was falling on deaf ears. Popov maintained that Russia had indications that "U.S. encouragement" had preceded the conflict. He said Russia assumed Ambassador Tefft had "absolute control" over "Misha" and questioned why Saakashvili had not obeyed Tefft, if the U.S. had indeed been warning Saakashvili against the use of force.

-- Importance of U.S.-Russian relations: Popov appealed to the U.S. to be patient and not to "push Russia aside." He maintained that Russia should not be "punished", and said that while Russia "can take blows, you should not exaggerate." Popov warned against "spoiling U.S.-Russian relations forever."

-- Saakashvili: Popov advised the U.S. to "dump Misha", whom he described as a liability, "a puppet, a U.S. creation, a dolly," and again as "an s.o.b." In response to our support for the democratically elected leader of Georgia, Tarabrin said there were no Russian plans to overthrow Saakashvili, adding that "every people deserves its ruler." He reiterated that the GOR considered Saakashvili "non-existent," and would talk to other GOG officials, but not with him.

#### More Rumors of U.S. Involvement

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¶3. (C/NF) Popov related that the Georgian Ambassador to Japan had told the GOJ that Georgia had reacted August 7-8 to "U.S. satellite intelligence" reports that Russian tanks were entering South Ossetia. Like DFM Ryabkov (reftel), Popov denied that Russia had started the conflict, with Tarabrin recounting how he had been summoned to the MFA at 1 a.m. in the morning as DFM Karasin was calling DFM Vashadze to find out what Georgia was up to. Popov mused whether the U.S. had purposely fed this wrong information to Saakashvili, in order to goad him into starting the war, a charge we firmly rejected, whereupon Tarabrin concluded that Saakashvili "must be mad."

#### No no-fly zone, military base, SS-21s, military assistance

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¶4. (C) Popov stated that there would not be a no-fly zone over Russian forces as proposed by General Staff Deputy General Nogovitsyn August 20. He doubted Russia would agree to establish a permanent military base in South Ossetia, and said he knew nothing about a deployment of SS-21 missiles to Tskhinvali. He conceded, however, that in a post-war situation there was much to resolve and decide by both the military and diplomats, with both sides often acting separately. Both Popov and Tarabrin expressed suspicions that U.S humanitarian assistance masked military supplies, which we rebutted, while also clarifying that the "Dallas" was a coast guard vessel and not a nuclear submarine. While Tarabrin welcomed humanitarian aid, he warned against a military resupply effort. Allowing that Georgia had the right to self-defense, he asserted it had no right for revenge.

#### Comment

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¶5. (C) As the MFA and MinDef comments illustrate, the paucity of detail in the Sarkozy document, and the intent of Russia to willfully reinterpret it according to its new strategic calculus, leaves us at loggerheads and Russia in a state of occupation of a swathe of central Georgia.  
BEYRLE